

TASOS LEIVADITIS

ENCHIRIDION EUTHANASIAE

Translated with an Introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

A manual for *euthanasia*. But not in the contemporary sense of a gentle and easy death, painlessly killing someone suffering from an incurable or debilitating disease. Rather, this is ‘euthanasia’ in the etymological sense of a ‘good’ (*eu*) ‘death’ (*thanatos*). When it comes to death, however, we are all “bad students” who haven’t learned how to read the signs, and so Leivaditis puts together an *enchiridion*, a ‘handbook’ that can conveniently be carried and consulted for reference and guidance, much like the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus in the ancient world. But whereas this popular Stoic *enchiridion* was envisaged as a handbook for living, dispensing practical advice on leading a morally good life, Leivaditis’ *enchiridion* is concerned with achieving a good *death*. And this form of death, his handbook teaches, is far from safe and comfortable, but involves extreme anguish and suffering. Hence the “reminder” in the prose-poem of that title of the crucifixion of Christ: unbeknownst to his contemporaries, the narrator was hanged long ago, but he, unlike Christ, remains hanged without prospect of resurrection. To die well is to die without hope, whether for rewards in an afterlife or for justice in this life.

If the first condition of a good death is dying without hope, the second condition is *living with the dead*. “Today I am in love with all the dead,” Leivaditis wrote in an early poem (“Men in the Land of Miracles,” from his 1956 work, *The Man with the Drum*). This love is abundantly evident in the present collection: the narrator in “Peisistratos,” for example, is haunted by nighttime visitations, and his solution is to go to a prostitute, not for sex but for her loose change, which he spends on cognac, drinking till he has passed out so that he can finally give some rest to the dead who “lie awake in our sleep”. These dead were the many friends and comrades Leivaditis struggled alongside with during the bitter years of the German Occupation (1941-44) and the subsequent civil war (1946-49), one of the earliest arenas of the global cold war. By the end of August 1949, the communist forces were decisively defeated in the mountains of northern Greece by a US-backed national army. This was a severe blow to the socialist ideals to which Leivaditis and his generation had pinned their hopes. Even worse was to come in 1956 with Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian revolution.

Disillusioned with politics, there was nowhere left to turn except poetry and drink (preferably cognac), and—via these—the dead. And so Leivaditis

opened up an extraordinary line of communication with ‘the other world’, which we disparagingly call ‘imaginary’. Yannis Motsios (b.1930), an active member of the communist insurgency who, in the wake of the military defeat, fled to the Soviet bloc and began there a distinguished literary career, has noted: “It was precisely the dead which kept Leivaditis alive—they supported him ethically, and often protected him from going astray, redirecting him towards the straight and narrow, which was their own path. Leivaditis’ dialogue with the dead is abiding, authentic and revelatory.”¹

Motsios, well versed in both Greek and Russian literature, goes on to draw a comparison with Leonid Andreyev’s novella *The Red Laugh* (1905), where the horror of war, the bloodsoaked ‘red laugh’, overwhelms the living, driving them to savagery and insanity. As the dead bodies pile up in the battlefields, they do not simply cease to exist but begin infiltrating the ‘real world’ that betrayed them. The narrator’s brother, in particular, descends into madness after returning from the front and soon dies, but he continues visiting the empty home, working away at his desk and consoling his brother, who is himself swiftly slipping from reality. In Leivaditis too, it difficult to distinguish the dead from the living, delusion from reality: dreams, and the “perverted passions” indulged therein, become an escape from poverty; one falls madly in love with a woman one has never met, and pins a lapel rose on her even though she may not even exist; the living, even the living God, depend upon the dead, such as Lazarus, for salvation; we hang about with friends who are entirely imaginary and therefore all the more suspect and dangerous, because they lurk within and so cannot be easily ignored; “The brute beat me to it,” an aspiring epistolographer says, after receiving a beautifully composed letter from his recently deceased roommate, but then asks: “Or was I the one who died?”

In Leivaditis’ handbook, then, the guidelines for life are drawn from the realm of death and dreams, the artistic and imaginative dimensions, as well as the natural wonders of childhood, where “the birds and the trees were innumerable.” For most, ‘coming of age’ means the clipping of wings, when our “clothes were returned without the feathers.” Not so for Leivaditis’ romantic daydreamers, who are “too ill to make it to adulthood,” or otherwise refuse the compromises of so-called civilization. A case in point is the narrator of “White Nights,” modeled on doomed Dostoevskian prototypes, who is so absorbed by his beautiful creations that he completely

¹ Yannis Motsios, “Yannis Ritsos—Tasos Leivaditis: Parallel Paths, Continual Poetic Dialogue,” in *Dodoni* [Greek], vol. 30, 2001, p.36.

disregards the outside world, rebuffing the demands for payment made by his landlord (or the “executioner,” as he calls him). This way of life, to an unsympathetic observer like a well-heeled landlord, even to intimate family members like one’s own mother, may look slothful and irresponsible. But it is “inconspicuous work,” as Leivaditis describes it, not drawing attention or seeking fame (“like the poet who rips up his manuscripts and leaves for the Ocean”), but privately and passionately searching for meaning, even in what others consider street litter, for example “a fallen leaf, a ticket, a homeric verse.” And these quests are not undertaken in the barren fields of academic discourse, but within “the immortality of sleep,” in the dream-worlds of poetry and music, inspired by people and places imbued with the simplicity and humility of the Gospels, or the revolutionary zeal of Goethe’s Egmont or Leivaditis’ fallen comrades.

When Leivaditis’ book was first published, in 1979, the spectre of war and violence was disappearing in the wake of a new era of political and cultural transformation—the ‘μεταπολίτευση’ (*metapolitefsi*), a period of transition between democratization and liberalization following the collapse of the military dictatorship in 1974. For the first time in Leivaditis’ life it was possible to freely express one’s views and publish one’s books without the threat of censorship or imprisonment. But as the Greek polity was modernizing itself in a progressive and pluralistic direction in line with the rest of western Europe, and gaining in 1979 full accession into the EEC (the European Economic Community, the forerunner of the European Union), it was the poets and artists who, as always, acted as the proverbial ‘canaries in the coal mine’. The danger of death on the battlefield was now replaced by the less perceptible but more pernicious death of the spirit, brought on by the rise of individualism and materialism. This new society, and its market-driven greed, struck Leivaditis as a “menagerie” that cannot countenance or comprehend “nightly acts of charity,” like those undertaken by the narrator in the poem of that title.

Leivaditis’ resistance against the advancing capitalist ethos is also evident on another level. His *Enchiridion* was awarded in 1979 the country’s highest poetry prize. It was well deserved, and Leivaditis, although much loved by the broader Greek community, has yet to receive the critical acclaim and attention that his work merits. But he never sought this, and indeed actively spurned it. Like the many marginal and anonymous characters that populate his poetry, Leivaditis refused the spotlight and very rarely gave interviews: “Everything

can be found in the work,” was his standard reply to journalists. Those who knew him well testify that he would always seek to change the subject whenever the conversation turned to his poetry. And in his occupation as a literary critic for an Athenian newspaper, he displayed a singular lack of combativeness or competitiveness in his reviews of others’ works. In his *Enchiridion*, similarly, the mark of the authentic artist is not pompous self-promotion but dying to the self, complete loss and renunciation, if not humiliation, “from the outset written off.” This is why the protagonist in the ironically titled “Greed” is said to have “found a dry spot outside the door where he’d sit and bark at passersby, / so greatly did he desire posthumous fame.” In a later work (*Small Book for Big Dreams*, 1987), Leivaditis explains: “at times mother would ask me with tears in her eyes: ‘Why do you like to humble yourself?’ ‘I want to understand, mother’.”

The understanding attained concerns what it is like to live on the fringes, dismissed as useless or insane, by a society that has lost its way and can no longer discriminate between the true and the counterfeit, the living and the dead. The repercussions are dramatically played out in the lives of Leivaditis’ characters, who are pervaded by a sense of exile, nostalgia and disorientation, making them liable to all manner of “geographical errors,” so that “you don’t even remember how you came down the stairs, how you crossed the road, how you got here.” One wakes up a stranger even in one’s own home, transformed overnight into someone unrecognizable. Unlike the birds of God, protected by divine providence, humankind has no “safeguards” from disunity and disintegration. The end is therefore brutal and ignominious, dying like a dog in “The Statue,” recalling the ending of Kafka’s *The Trial*.

While the journey to the past or to the imagination is made in pleasant reverie, the route forward through ‘real life’ is dark and dangerous, “a long journey, upon which the silence lingered.” Language falters, as does the light, with Leivaditis typically setting his poems at night, or in the intermediate stage of twilight, the falling of the dusk, which is when, Hegel said, “the owl of Minerva spreads its wings”—a time traditionally set apart for rest, reflection and enlightenment. But in Leivaditis it marks the approach of chaos and confusion, the descent of dread, regretful longing, melancholy, isolation and anxiety, moods mirrored by a topography of desolate landscapes and cold, barren (or haunted) rooms. And always lurking nearby is the threat of violence and crime: “the gun is already pressing against my ribs,” one narrator says, while another finds himself before the firing squad every

morning. The apparent calm of the night offers no respite, as it might be interrupted by an unexpected knock at the door, or one's thorns tear through the bedsheets, and so even "in sleep there is always a threat—which makes us close our eyes." As a result, some turn to sleeping pills, others lose themselves in fairy tales or alcohol, while others still lose their mind with delusions of running away on a white horse.

But escape or evasion, even if possible, is no solution, especially if the goal is to die well. In "Similes" (a figure of speech beloved by Leivaditis), a comparison is made with "small neighbourhood tailor shops, where one gets dressed in order to die." Although not made explicit, the missing term of the comparison is, arguably, human life itself. Life is no dress rehearsal, but the sole chance we have at a good death, and so it must become a constant *memento mori*, a training for death in the way taught and practiced by Socrates in classical Athens (*Phaedo* 67e) and by Leivaditis in the modern-day, war-ravaged version of the city.

The encounter with death, in all its guises, became for Leivaditis the foundation of his life's work. The Russian critic and popular children's author, Kornei Chukovsky, made a similar point about Andreyev, in the context of his older friend's *joie de vivre*:

After one of these attacks of gaiety he became gloomy and usually began delivering monologues about death. This was his favorite topic. He pronounced the word *death* in a special way—very distinctly and sensually: *death*, just like some voluptuaries pronounce the word 'woman'. Here Andreyev displayed great talent: he was better than anyone else at fearing death. It is no easy matter to fear death; many try, but they do not achieve anything; Andreyev succeeded splendidly; that was his true vocation: to experience the despair and horror of death.²

Like Andreyev, and the many other Russian authors Leivaditis read and admired, the *Enchiridion* seeks to plumb the depths of life and death, extracting in the process a handbook, some lines or a lamp, with which we can go "from room to room / lighting up the oblivion."

N.N.T.

² Quoted in Richard Davies (ed.), *Photographs by a Russian Writer: Leonid Andreyev: An Undiscovered Portrait of Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p.24.

AFTERNOON DELIGHTS

Or perhaps to be more precise everything began with that clock, a clock stupid and bald, why was I to blame? I would simply sit quietly on the couch every afternoon and eat my young aunties, but one at a time so that the nakedness of the wall would not immediately become apparent, and I once spat blood in the street, that's how vulgar the city was

and it was only the lack of any interest in other people that gave our lives their bottomless depth.

REMINDER

A plain room, with little furniture, like an excerpt from the Gospels—thus everything quickly ended and Joanna wept behind the station, it was in any case a sublime secret which I'd forget as soon as I was about to utter it, I then opened the violin case—and yet, at times, a grievance grips me and I wear my tie in such a way that they understand, at last,
that I've been hanged since long ago.

FUTURE MASTERPIECES

So that I don't break my promise, every night I had to forget, like the poor who are ready to consent no matter what is offered them in return—as long as they let them. And one day I will write for them a story so tender that I'll lose my way.

PERVERTED PASSIONS

Someday I'll remember something so beautiful, it will be autumn in that narrow side-street with the glassware stores, there where, when we went bankrupt, father would sell dreambooks—thereafter I never came out of the dream even though I was cold, I could at least give myself over to my perverted passions: melancholy or crowd crushes—because, let's be honest, I have never loved anyone and that affectionate gaze of mine was for entirely private use

like the immortality of poets.

MRS OLGA AND I

There is a certain queer time in the evening when something needs to happen, otherwise you're done for—it's that time when Mrs Olga, an impoverished seamstress, would place her fingers in warm water and I would knock on doors, one by one, I mean to say that our shameful actions always save us from an even more difficult situation, some people would even laugh at me for wearing mother's hat, they forget that one gets dressed in the morning

solely in order to suffer.

TASOS LEIVADITIS was born in Athens on 20 April 1922 into a relatively affluent and cultured family. The youngest of four siblings (the eldest, Alekos, became an acclaimed actor), Tasos enjoyed a happy and carefree childhood, and took a keen interest in music, poetry and politics from a young age. But the onset of World War II changed everything: his father's bankruptcy plunged the family into poverty, and the German occupation compelled Leivaditis to abandon his university studies and join the communist-led Resistance. The German troops had barely left Greek soil when the country was beginning to sink into a full-scale civil war. As the political crisis between Left and Right erupted in December 1944 into a violent confrontation (now known as the *Dekemvriana* or Battle of Athens), Leivaditis was arrested and imprisoned, the first of many times he would come into conflict with the right-dominated state apparatus. With the escalation of the civil war in 1948, Leivaditis, along with countless other leftist writers and artists, was again arrested and, without ever being brought to trial, imprisoned for more than three years in various island prison camps, including the barbarous Makronisos. Soon after his release in 1951, he published his first three poetry books in quick succession (*Battle at the Edge of the Night*, *This Star Is For All Of Us*, and *The Wind at the Crossroads of the World*), a remarkable triptych marked by the horrors of war and the yearning for justice and peace.

These early and politicized works were to gradually give way to a more introspective, allusive and existentialist approach, as Leivaditis' commitment to communism began to wane, especially after the revelations of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. During this time Leivaditis was working as a literary critic for the broadly leftist newspaper, *Avghē* ('Dawn'), but in April 1967 he would again find himself on the wrong side of history: a group of colonels seized power in a coup, the leftist press was duly shut down and Leivaditis was out of a job. In response to the dictators' regime of censorship, the most established writers in the country refused to publish any of their own work, and Leivaditis followed suit, restricting himself to translating or adapting literary classics. As the dictatorship relaxed its grip, Leivaditis began to publish again, beginning in 1972 with *Night Visitor*, and continuing after the reinstatement of democracy in 1974 with several works over the same decade, culminating in *Enchiridion Euthanasiae* in 1979, which earned him the State Poetry Prize, Greece's highest honour for a work of poetry.

Leivaditis died in Athens on 30 October 1988, aged 66. He had written twenty volumes of poetry, with a final collection, *Autumn Manuscripts*, published posthumously. A much loved and widely read poet in Greece, he was accorded a state funeral, during which the celebrated Greek actress and then Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, proclaimed: "Leivaditis has departed at the height of his powers, having won the praises of critics and the universal recognition of our people, who read him, sung his verses,

understood and loved him. He chose to depart without flags and banners. He chose to depart the way he lived: as a poet.”